Snap, Crackle, Pop

By Lt. Paul Brantuas

As I headed to work one sunny Lemoore morning, I noticed the winds were howling: sustained greater than 25 knots, gusting greater than 30 knots. These conditions made it out of limits for me to launch.

Not in any hurry, I worked most of the day trying to get ahead with my desk job. My orginal destination, Albuquerque, New Mexico, for a gas-and-go, didn't look good for winds or weather, so I refiled to Davis Monthan AFB in Arizona. I planned to spend the night, then launch in the morning to reach my ultimate destination, NAS Corpus Christi, Texas.

I was having difficulty with the new version of Navy Flight Weather Briefer, so I printed my DD-175 and faxed it to a weather briefer at NAS North Island. I had used North Island's weather briefer just two days earlier when I returned to NAS Lemoore and was impressed with their expeditious service. The winds finally had subsided, so I called NAS North Island to get an update to my DD-175-1. They faxed back a new dash-1 with the updated void time, along with the weather briefer's initials, and I was on my way. I launched just before sunset, with a daytime visor, and proceded to Davis Monthan. Before I left, I visited the aviation-digital-data-service (ADDS) website to verify the en route and destination weather. Having been on numerous cross-country flights, using ADDS as a backup is a standard practice. Until my en route descent, the flight was uneventful.

The en route descent was from FL270, 50 miles northwest of Davis Monthan, in an FA-18C, at night, in what was supposed to be good weather—except for an unforecasted thunderstorm brewing 30 miles southwest of the field. So far, it had been a beautiful night, with stars filling the desert sky.

Passing FL220, I briefly encountered IMC conditions. As I asked air-traffic control if there was any significant weather between me and my destination, I watched static electricity build from wingtip to wingtip and encompass my jet. According to my controller, I was clear of any significant weather. Davis Monthan ATIS reported the field VMC. I brought up my air-to-ground radar, leveled the elevation, and saw nothing. Static electricity was crackling off of my canopy bow, so I reached up and lowered my daytime visor. I asked for an immediate descent and a vector to the east to get away from whatever I was in now. Then I heard "snap, crackle, pop." Something terrible just had happened.

Initially after the strike, I thought I had experienced a total electrical failure. The light had blinded me, and it felt like somebody had smashed my canopy bow with a baseball bat as hard as he could. The jet shook violently. After about five seconds, which at the time seemed like an eternity, my instruments and displays slowly came back into my vision. I saw haze above my left eye, so I knew something was not quite right with the canopy or my left eyeball.

When I got on deck at Davis Monthan, I called the duty officer and the operations officer (Ops O) to let them know I just had experienced what I thought, at the time, was a massive static-electrical discharge. I told the Ops O that I would look at the jet in the morning to get a better idea of any damage. When I saw the plane the next morning, it was clear the canopy was damaged badly. Also, the trailing edge of the starboard rear stabilator had a hole the size of a fingernail surrounded with burn marks. The "exit wound" confirmed a lightning strike, instead of a static discharge. I was happy to be alive. I just wanted to return to NAS Lemoore and end my journey.

While at Davis Monthan, I had their weather ser-

Photo composite illustration

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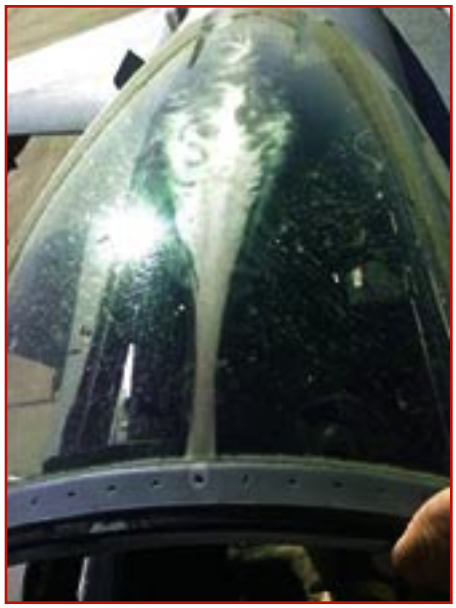

Lt. Brantuas' damaged canopy

vice recall the weather data during my flight. I came to the safety officer armed with a stack of printouts, including graphical depictions of lightning strikes that night, ready to tell my story. All things being said, I had done everything right and had covered my bases. I didn't fly through any known thunderstorm conditions but had encountered an unforcasted one in the vicinity. The damage to the canopy was in the Class-C category, and the stabilator was an easy fix.

I've heard of lightning strikes in clear air occurring nowhere near thunderstorms. Having been through this experience, if you ever see one remotely close to your route of flight or destination—divert; it's not worth the risk. From what I've learned, you don't have to be near a thunderstorm for lightning to reach out and slap you. I have seen a lot in my nine years of naval aviation, but this flight tops the list. You can dodge a surface-to-air missile (if you see it), jink around 57 mm, but you won't stand a chance against mother nature when she is angry. Just stay away from her and live to fly another day, or night.

Lt. Brantuas flies with VFA-125.